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SUBJECT: CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: SECURITY JITTERS ACCOMPANY RELIGIOUS FREEDOM GAINS ON THE EVE OF CHRISTMAS

1. (SBU) Summary: Reliable contacts in the Protestant community in the Central Highlands told us that security has been intensified throughout the region in the run-up to Christmas. In archconservative Dak Lak Province there appear to be near-blanket restrictions on Protestant gatherings. Elsewhere in the Central Highlands, villages that are considered to be sympathetic to the "Dega Church" and ethnic minority separatism are under the most intense police scrutiny. Our contacts are not aware of any recent police arrests or beatings of ethnic minority individuals, including recent returnees from Cambodia. However, tensions between ethnic minority communities and local police remain high, especially over land issues; tensions led to a clash with a local military unit in Gia Lai that left one soldier dead. On the other hand, our contacts report significant progress in legalizing the operation of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam in Gia Lai and Kontum provinces. In particular, the SECV cites the December 12 formal registration of 248 "meeting points" in Gia Lai, effectively legalizing operations for all of the SECV's 75,000 believers in the province. The United World Mission Church -- a house church organization based in Danang -- also reports an improved operating environment in much of the Central Highlands. The GVN appears to be adopting a two-track strategy of promoting the operations of non-threatening religious groups while suppressing the "Dega Church," which it considers nothing but a front for ethnic minority separatism. End Summary.

Security Intensifying Amid Pre-Christmas Restrictions...

2. (SBU) Over the past week, leaders of the Protestant house church movement and the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) have told us that, beginning in December, police and military units have been deployed in increased numbers throughout the Central Highlands. Teams of three or four police and security officials have been assigned to monitor specific ethnic minority villages. Police have set up checkpoints along the roads and routinely stop and question travelers headed to ethnic minority villages. Officials reportedly are concerned that ethnic minority separatists will take advantage of Christmas celebrations to organize anti-GVN activity. This led police to prevent at least one SECV church worker from accessing an ethnic minority village in Gia Lai Province.

3. (SBU) The security presence and restrictions are particularly strong in "sensitive communes" where villagers participated in protests in 2001 and 2004 or fled to Cambodia. For example, in M'Drak district of Dak Lak, police decreed that villagers could not gather to celebrate Christmas, although families could worship and celebrate individually. Similar conditions have been imposed on certain villages in Gia Lai considered by the government to be strongholds of the "Dega Church." In a number of cases, these Dega churches sought to apply for legal registration using a "cover name," but were denied. Our SECV contact spoke with one Dega pastor who reportedly could not articulate to which denomination of Protestantism he belonged, but was well versed in concepts of ethnic minority nationalism. That pastor reportedly told our contact that there is an operational Dega government in exile and that ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands had to continue to hope for "liberation."

4. (SBU) In Kontum Province, one village in Sa Thay district also faced restrictions on gathering. Our contact explained that this village was the source of a recent group of ethnic minority individuals who sought to cross to Cambodia. Another ethnic minority village in Kon Plong district was allowed to gather, but Protestant worshipers reportedly were being discriminated against in the distribution of government assistance, with the unstated goal of inducing them to abandon their faith.

5. (SBU) Our SECV contact also reported that a group of ethnic San Chi that had migrated from northern Vietnam to Gia Lai and had sought to affiliate with the SECV were expressly forbidden from gathering to celebrate Christmas. Their application to register as a congregation in accordance with the new legal framework on religion was denied because the group had only recently arrived in the province and officials considered their situation "unstable." Unfortunately, the San Chi could not participate in other SECV church services in the area there because they did not speak Jarai or Vietnamese, the lingua

franca of the SECV churches in the region. The SECV is appealing the decision with the provincial government.

16. (SBU) Although the police have not arrested or otherwise detained or beaten ethnic minority individuals, including returnees from Cambodia, their presence has made villagers "edgier." In early December, in one ethnic minority village in Duc Co district, Gia Lai Province, dissatisfaction over land compensation and encroachment from a state-owned rubber plantation led to a serious clash between villagers and a local military unit, during which one soldier was killed. There were no reported ethnic minority casualties. Despite the death, Gia Lai authorities -- at least thus far -- have not arrested any of the villagers. Our contact explained that authorities recognize that the grievances that fueled the outburst were legitimate, that the military unit was conspiring with the rubber plantation to disadvantage the ethnic minorities, and that arrests would trigger further disorder.

...But Significant Progress As Well  
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17. (SBU) Despite the stepped-up security, our contacts said that significant progress continues to be made in easing the restrictions on most Protestant church operations in Gia Lai and Kontum provinces. On December 12, the Gia Lai SECV received official notification from the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs that the province had formally accepted the registration of 248 SECV "meeting points" throughout the province. According to our SECV contact, taken together with the 29 SECV churches that already had been recognized -- the bulk in 2004 and 2005 -- all SECV operations for its 75,000 worshipers in the province have been legalized. In coming months, as these individual congregations meet internal SECV regulations, the SECV will petition with the provincial government for recognition of these "meeting points".

18. (SBU) Our contacts report that conditions in Kontum also have improved significantly in 2005. House churches belonging to the United World Mission Church (UWMC) -- headquartered in Danang -- which previously faced significant harassment, now function without incident. Provincial officials proactively reached out to UWMC local leaders to encourage them to register under the new legal framework on religion. In a separate phone conversation, Pastor Nguyen Toi, UWMC President, confirmed that conditions for his church had improved throughout the Central Highlands. Similarly, the SECV, which previously had a very limited footprint in Kontum because of official harassment, has found it easier to operate there. For example, a local SECV pastor who previously was told that worshipers could not gather at his home because he was not legally registered in the province was asked to worship "normally." He also was informed that he could expand the meeting room in his home even though the house is not yet legally registered in the province.

19. (SBU) Comment: Formal registration of the SECV's 248 meeting points in Gia Lai is a significant milestone; the SECV has been lobbying hard for the past three years to reach this point. Equally encouraging is the treatment that the SECV and some other house church organizations are receiving in Kontum. Government efforts to liberalize operations for the SECV and some house churches, coupled with the intensified security focus on "Dega" villages, suggests that the GVN is adopting a two-track strategy of promoting the operations of non-threatening, apolitical religious groups while continuing to try to suppress the "Dega church," which it considers nothing but a front for ethnic minority separatism. The clash in Duc Co district between ethnic minority villagers and the local military is a sharp reminder that this strategy will fail absent a sustained effort to address the underlying socio-economic grievances that drive ethnic minority disaffection in the Central Highlands. End Comment.

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